

PUNK

RESEARCH

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Introduction

Punk Research is a quarterly newsletter dedicated to the academic study of the type of music labelled "punk."

It is designed for people who wish to look beneath the superficial trappings of punk music to the underlying functions and values. However, the goal of Punk Research is not to arrive at rigid conclusions. Rather, it will try to serve as a forum for diverse opinions.

In the current issue, two questions are brought up that are relevant to punk research:

1. Where are the origins of punk?
2. How should "punk" be defined?

There is no simple answer to either question. Even still, this newsletter will attempt to stimulate dialogue that might help to clarify things through the clash of ideas.

People are encouraged to write to Punk Research and express their opinions. The deadline for submitting any material is one month prior to publication. Academic articles about punk are greatly needed. Please include footnotes if necessary.

Other publications are welcome to quote any material appearing in this newsletter, provided they cite the source.

Single issues cost \$1.00; subscriptions cost \$4.00 per year. International rates are \$1.50 per issue, \$6.00 per year. Please make checks payable to Michael E. Johnson.

ORIGINS OF THE WORD "PUNK"

Back in the 1600's, a "punk" was defined as a prostitute, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Volume VIII, page 1,604).

Thomas Lodge was the first author in England to use a form of the word. In 1596, he wrote, "He hath a Punck (as the pleasant Singer calls her)."

Shakespeare was the next author to use a form of the word. In his 1603 work Measure for Measure, he wrote, "She may be a Puncke: for many of them, are neither Maid, Widow, nor Wife."

One early author, Thomas Middleton, spelled the word "pung." In a 1607 book he wrote, "I may grace her with name of a Curtizan, a Backslider, a Prostitution, or such a Toy, but when all comes to al tis but a plaine Pung."

The modern version "punk" first occurred in 1785. Wolcott wrote, "Like a poor pilloried Punk he bawled."

Future issues of Punk Research will look at

1. bibliographies of articles written about punk,
2. historical roots of punk,
3. definitions of punk,
4. descriptive overviews of punk-related publications,
5. content analyses of song lyrics,
6. indexes of publications by subject and author.

Michael E. Johnson

MEDIA INCONSISTENCIESABOUT THE
ORIGINS OF PUNK

Where was punk music born? That question can have three different answers, depending on which national newspaper you read. A brief survey of articles on punk in major newspapers revealed that writers held contradictory opinions on the origins of punk.

Some writers think that punk was born in America, while others think that punk had British roots. Still others claim that punk was born simultaneously in both countries.

Writers who believe that punk has American origins are John Rockwell of the New York Times and Steve Simels of Stereo Review magazine. Rockwell stated, "Punk was arguably an American invention, dating back to the late 1960's and such Detroit acts as the MC5 and Iggy and the Stooges." (1)

In 1978, Simels reported that the term "punk" was first identified with a particular school of pre-Beatles rock bands in the Northwest United States, such as the Sonics, the early Paul Revere, the Kingsmen, and a band called Question Mark and the Mysterians. (2)

On the other hand, writers in the San Francisco Chronicle have stated in their articles that punk was born in England. Journalists Perry Lang and Paul Liberatore reported, "The movement (punk) began in Britain in the mid-1970's among socially disillusioned youths, many of them working class and economically deprived, ..." (3)

In a 1979 article, Joel Selvin stated, "In England, where punk originated, the bands used music to speak directly to British working-class youths about social conditions and political issues, ..." (4)

Articles about punk in major American newspapers are telling the public different and conflicting information about the origins of punk.

Writers who believe in simultaneous origins in America and Britain include Dan Morgan of the Washington Post. He said that punk was born in New York and England in 1976. (5)

Another writer, Robert Palmer in the New York Times, said that punk "first erupted in New York City and London in the mid-1970's." (6)

Where are the true origins of punk? Is it America, England, or both? Unfortunately, it is difficult to answer that question given the contradictions and inconsistencies in major American newspapers.

If you can shed any light on the history of punk, please write.

REFERENCES

- (1) John Rockwell, "Experimental Rock Vigorous in Britain," New York Times, Jan. 14, 1979, Section D, page 33, column 1.
- (2) Steve Simels, "Steve Simels Explains (But Does Not Apologize For) Punk Rock," Stereo Review, Oct. 1978, p. 94.
- (3) Perry Lang and Paul Liberatore, "Punks Rock to 'Slam-Dancing'," San Francisco Chronicle, Aug. 18, 1981, p. 6, col. 3.
- (4) Joel Selvin, "S.F. Goes Punk. Rude, Raw Rock 'n' Roll from the Underground," San Francisco Chronicle, Oct. 22, 1979, p. 6, col. 1.
- (5) Dan Morgan, "Punk Rockers Fashion 'A Theater of Cruelty' To Sound Social Alarm," Washington Post, Dec. 27, 1981, sec. A, p. 17, col. 1.
- (6) Robert Palmer, "'Punk Rock' Flourishes in Los Angeles," New York Times, Mar. 22, 1981, sec. D, p. 11, col. 4.

WHAT IS
THE DEFINITION
OF "PUNK"?

A survey was conducted of punk-related publications, in order to find out how editors define the word "punk."

After reading the definitions of 25 editors, it appears that many people are uncomfortable with the word "punk" as a descriptor for today's music. Many respondents kept the word within quotes, while others expressed their dissatisfaction with the word.

Most writers seemed to identify two characteristics of punk: rebellion and individuality.

To some, "punk" is an empty word.

1. Daniel Philant, N D
(Austin, Texas)
"'Punk' is such an old phrase that has been raped too many times to have much meaning, ..."
2. Carl Caldwell, Daily Obituary
(New York, New York)
"The whole concept of punk has lost meaning. It is like rock and roll."
3. Karin Kieser, The Last Thing
(Ontario, Canada)
"I don't like to use that word (punk) because it is negative, ..."
4. Andy Bennett, Fight Back
(Kalamazoo, Michigan)
"I don't have a definition for 'punk' as I personally find it a bad and often misleading title."
5. Anthony, Raveup
(Chicago, Illinois)
"I don't really use the word 'punk,' or even think it."
6. Peter Hall, Blam!
(Essex, England)
"Punk is now like funk, disco, heavy metal, ska, electronic, just a name."

Punk is rebellion

1. Karin Kieser, The Last Thing
(Ontario, Canada)
"They (punks) are rebelling against a closed-minded society. There is no great psychological aspect behind 'punk'. It is simply an act of rebellion against everything from music and clothes to world wide politics, to very basic attitudes. It is an act against peoples' simplemindedness.
"Even Christ was considered a rebel. Would you call Christ a 'punk'?"
2. Mike, New Alliance Records
(San Pedro, California)
"Punk means to me: a certain belligerent attitude towards things in general. It's rebellion, like shitting in your pants on purpose."

Punk is individuality

1. Elissa Rashkin, Hamsterama
(Pacific Grove, California)
"I guess to me being a 'punk' is just being myself and (to use a cliched term) thinking for myself instead of letting others think for me."
2. Anthony, Raveup (Chicago, Illinois)
"... (punk is) a different way of doing things on a more personal level, doing things individually, being on a level where everyone is pretty much equal."
3. Jone J., Paranoia (Reno, Nevada)
"Individuality is the key!"
4. Laura Miller, Issue (Kansas City, Missouri)
"Punks are very individual people, ..."
5. Rachel Levy, Issue (Kansas City, Missouri)
"It (punk) stands for individuality. That is each person follows what they believe in."

Searching For A Definition

1. Joan McNulty, Harmony In My Head (Arlington, Massachusetts)
 "In my opinion the term punk is a kind of first line defense, a necessary precaution and a street-wise front adopted by people conditioned to expect opposition when they refuse passively to accept their position in the social hierarchy."
2. Urs Vollmin, Apocalypse Now (Sissach, Switzerland)
 "Punk is no big business, punk is the rock n roll for the 80's and 90's, the soundtrack for the holocaust, the world war 3."
3. Anthony, Raveup (Chicago, Illinois)
 "Also, I think "punk" is being able to have fun without hurting anyone/anything or having to maintain a macho image, or any image."
4. Wilum Pugmyr, Punk Lust (Seattle, Washington)
 "Punk, if it is about anything, is feeling. How we feel is reflected in our noise, in our look, and in our attitude."
5. Jone J., Paranoia (Reno, Nevada)
 "I think it's important to show humor and that punk is about being socially aware but also having fun."
6. Rachel Levy, Issue (Kansas City, Missouri)
 "Punk is a way of life. It is being yourself and not worrying about it. It is being aware. It is recognizing problems and working to make them better.
 "Punks care. They care about life, pollution, war, politics, and our earth. They express their anger and frustrations about life in their music and slam dancing."
7. John Molin, D.C. Riot! (Washington, D.C.)
 "Another feeling that I get is this anti-sheep feeling. Sometimes I want to do things differently just because everybody else does it one way."
8. Laura Miller, Issue (Kansas City, Missouri)
 "(Punks) are not concerned with petty things. We are serious about important issues like world hunger, nukes, racism, sexism, crime and the unsure future of the world.
 "Punk is life, love, and caring."
9. Steve Caballero, Speedzine (San Jose, California)
 "(Punk is) a type of music and an attitude."
10. Carl Caldwell, Daily Obituary (New York, New York)
 "Punk expresses itself through extremisms in a way not many other musical forms do."
11. Thomas Siegel, Ink Disease (Los Angeles, California)
 "Punks seem to be a small minority but we are committed. To what who knows but we are committed. Some people are committed to put out records, others mags, and others to be in bands.
 "The main thing is that 99.9% of the punks either get energy from music or from making music."
12. Andy Bennett, Fight Back (Kalamazoo, Michigan)
 "I am a person who is concerned with the world around me and the people in it; if this makes me a punk then that is what I am."
13. Roz, Hungry Years (San Antonio, Texas)
 "The music is what is punk. It has to be fast and totally on fire."

BOOKS ABOUT PUNK

Last Gasp of San Francisco has published several books on punk in California. For more information, write to them at P.O. Box 212, Berkeley, CA 94704.

The most comprehensive book to date is Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave by Peter Belsito and Bob Davis.

Published in 1983, this book has 128 pages of art and copy. Half of the book is devoted to Los Angeles bands, while the other half focuses on San Francisco.

Over 700 bands are described through words, over 200 photos, and over 70 illustrations. Two dozen pages have color. The chronological history of punk bands is supplemented by concert photos, publicity shots, concert posters, album covers, and art.

One book is dedicated to punk art: Streetart: The Punk Poster In San Francisco 1977 - 1981. Published in 1981, it was edited by Peter Belsito, researched by Bob Davis, and written by Marian Kester.

In 128 pages, Streetart contains 126 different posters that are black and white. The book provides thorough documentation on the specifics of each poster--the title, author, date, original size, and method of duplication.

Furthermore, this book also contains brief yet informative essays related to certain bands or posters. Streetart concludes with a list of footnotes and additional readings.

WANTED: Research Fodder

Clippings of articles about punk that have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and journals.

Copies of the lyrics of punk songs along with any accompanying art.

Personal definitions of "punk".

Sample copies of punk-related publications.

In 1983, Last Gasp also published another paper book on one of the most publicized American bands--the Dead Kennedys. The result is Dead Kennedys: The Unauthorized Version, edited by f-Stop Fitzgerald and written by Marian Kester.

This 65-page book covers the complete history of the band as of 1983. The editorial content is well researched and cites dozens of sources from newspapers and magazines.

There are countless photos of concerts and band publicity shots; but the most interesting content is found in the lyrics and graphic arts interspersed throughout the book.

Do you know of any other punk-related books? If so, let me know!

IS PUNK DEAD?

1. Daniel Philant, N D (Austin, Texas)

"... personally for me the term "punk" lost meaning in and around 1978."

2. Marsha Gordon, The Bob (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

"At the point where the music and dress became empty I stop calling the movement 'punk.'"

3. Smitty, Attack! (Seattle, Washington)

"It (punk) seems rather dated in 1983. There is little 'revolution' or 'outrage' left - social protest has become a vague, unoriginal and formless movement, and "punk" has lost any sort of force that it once (?) had."

4. Mark Rubin, Daily Obituary (Norman, Oklahoma)

"Punk is dead."

5. Peter Hall, Blam! (Essex, England)

"Is punk dead? Maybe. Maybe not. That's for you the individual to decide."

